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Two sites hoping to woo ag center -- and tourists

WINNER -- MERCER OR NELSON COUNTY -- TO BE ANNOUNCED AUG. 24

By Greg Kocher
CENTRAL KENTUCKY BUREAU

Mercer and Nelson counties are vying to be picked as the home of the Kentucky Agriculture Heritage Center, a multimillion-dollar museum and working farm that would tell the story of agriculture's contribution to the state.

A 10-member site selection team visited the counties Tuesday, and an announcement on the chosen site will come Aug. 24 at the Kentucky State Fair, said Harvey Mitchell, chairman of a statewide planning committee for the non-profit center.

The Mercer County site is at the intersection of U.S. 127 and Mundy's Landing Road north of Harrodsburg. That site, owned by Mercer County entrepreneur Ralph Anderson, has about 50 acres.

The Nelson County site is Wickland, a farm and historic home to three Kentucky governors on U.S. 62 on Bardstown's eastern edge. That county-owned site has 67 acres. The Mercer and Nelson sites are about 50 miles apart.

The ag center would have a walking tour of historic agriculture; a meeting complex that would seat 500 to 800 people, plus a theater; library, videoconference center, kitchen and a retail outlet for Kentucky products.

"There's more to this story than a collection of antique farm machinery," Mitchell said. "There's a need to make certain that people understand rural Kentucky."

Between tourist visits and conferences, the center might attract 200,000 or more people annually. Ag centers in Indiana and Mississippi draw 320,000 and 100,000, respectively, and most of those visitors come from within each state, according to a 2003 study

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prepared for the Kentucky legislature.

Mercer County Judge-Executive John Trisler said an ag center could be another regional attraction.

"Shakertown is a pretty highly visited area, but by adding another attraction it would help both our county and regional tourism," Trisler said.

Mercer County Fiscal Court voted last week to commit \$100,000 each year over five years to help with operating expenses for the project. It also intends to seek grants and other funds to extend sewers to the U.S. 127 site.

Nelson County Judge-Executive Dean Watts said Bardstown -- site of My Old Kentucky Home State Park, *The Stephen Foster Story* outdoor drama, and several museums -- has the tourists in place to ensure that the ag center would be a success.

"We feel we've got a lot to offer," Watts said. "We have the traffic to support it."

In June, the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board, the group created in 2000 to oversee the money that the state receives from the national tobacco settlement, approved \$1 million for a market/development study, the architectural design and the marketing and promotion of the center.

The center's estimated cost is \$24 million to \$30 million.

"One of our goals is to raise half the money from the public for the capital costs of this facility," Mitchell said. "We would hope to go to the General Assembly in 2008 and ask for the rest of the bricks-and-mortar money."

The center would be built in 2009 and open in 2010.

The idea for the center goes back to 2002, when the Kentucky General Assembly passed a resolution to study the feasibility of establishing a "museum of Kentucky Agriculture."

There was concern that Kentucky was losing the traditions and culture of farming as the number of farms declined. In 1972, there were 124,000 farms totaling 16 million acres in the state. By 2001, there were 88,000 farms totaling 13.6 million acres.

"We see so much land that has been lost due to development," Mitchell said. "I'm not being critical of any of that; most of it is progress. But I would say that in many counties green space is hard to find."

Several commodity organizations, Kentucky Farm Bureau and others provided seed money to get the ag-center effort started.

"We found there was a lot of support to do this. We have not started a major fund-raising effort but we had some who felt so serious about this, particularly Farm Bureau, that they were willing to go ahead and put some money into it," Mitchell said.

"To date I think there are 53 organizations who have said this is a great idea and should have been done a long time ago," Mitchell said. "The ag heritage center has been talked about for 30 years, but no one has gotten around to doing it."

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Mitchell is farm manager for Anderson Circle Farm, owned by entrepreneur and philanthropist Ralph Anderson. A native of Harrodsburg and founder of Belcan, an engineering company in Cincinnati, Anderson owns about 7,000 acres in Mercer.

Bruce Harper, executive director for the ag center committee, has an office at Anderson Circle Farm. But Mitchell said it is not a foregone conclusion that the ag center will be located in Mercer County, despite Anderson's backing and support.

"This has got to be a statewide effort. One person cannot do this, and we have no intention of subverting the process," Mitchell said.

He emphasized that, as Kentucky becomes more urbanized, there is a need to tell agriculture's story.

"There are so many people whose parents and grandparents were on the farm, but many of them are so far removed they really don't know where food comes from. We also see this as an opportunity to tell the world that food is safe, and that farmers are good stewards of the land and livestock."

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